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AUTHOR Hook, J. N.
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ABSTRACT

While accepting the world of technology as necessary and beneficial to the progress of man, the English teacher's role should be to use his subject matter in fostering skills which will further humanize students. By stressing the power of words, by exploring the relationship of language to history and to technology, and by viewing language as a commentary on the human condition, language study can engender in students a love and respect for the word. Composition skills should be presented as a means of expressing reality, hopes, and dreams--not simply as practice in correct usage and grammar. Similarly, rather than picking apart a literary work to the point of dryness or even death, the teacher should emphasize people in literature and the richness of human interaction found in great literary works. (MF)

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Humanities for What?

By J. N. Hook, Professor
Department of English
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The YMCA and YWCA Faculty Forum on our University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus last fall sponsored a series of lectures under the general title "Beyond Technology:

Our Human and Natural Environment." The first lecture in that series, which I had to miss because of being in Washington, was entitled "Technology for What?" I have stolen the counterpart of the topic. Mine is "Humanities for What?"

Like most other people, I worry sometimes about the direction or directions in which the human race is headed. More accurately, I worry about the lack of direction, the lack of any generally accepted goals. I'm not alone in that worry, of course. *Life* magazine a couple of years ago ran a series of articles on national goals, some philosophers turn from contemplation of the past to contemplation of the future, the more thoughtful of scientists occasionally ask where they are taking us, American presidents set up commissions to consider questions about national purpose, and much of the campus unrest of the past few years has been generated by idealistic young people who also worry about where we are going and about how important and how relevant are some of the things we require them to study.

The technologists, with the exception of a few philosopher-technologists, are primarily concerned with immediacy. I am not belittling them when I say that, and I shall applaud as vigorously as anyone else whatever progress they may make in prevention or cure of cancer, increased safety of automobiles, reduction of air and water pollution, the exploration of space, and so on. Because of technology you and I live much more comfortably than our grandparents did. My own maternal grandparents lived for a time in a sod shanty on the rolling prairie land of eastern Nebraska, with winter temperatures sometimes descending to thirty or forty below zero, and with blizzards occasionally so severe that cattle froze to death in a built-on addition to the shanty. Snow sometimes was so deep that it was impossible to drive to the village three miles away; there were no snowplows. My grandparents knew little of what was happening in the outside world. Of course they had no television, radio, or telephone. Transportation was slow and difficult. Medical attention was hard to get; the nearest hospital was fifty miles away — perhaps ten hours in a wagon, and my grandparents couldn't afford a buggy — and by modern standards the hospital was poorly equipped and its doctors were very ignorant. One of my uncles died of diabetes because medical science did not yet know how to control it. My grandparents had no supermarket to which they could go, as we can, for foods from around the country and the world. They raised almost everything they ate. My grandmother had to make her own soap with lye and animal fat. She churned her own butter

laboriously by moving a dasher up and down in a churn. Water had to be carried or hauled about a quarter of a mile. My mother and aunts and uncles had to walk two miles to a one-room school that was in session three or four months a year. My mother finished the sixth grade; some of her brothers and sisters didn't stick it out that long. My father, in a similar environment, left school after the third grade — a total of about twelve months of school.

What I am saying is that I have a much more comfortable life than my grandparents had, or my parents. I have had more opportunity to develop my potential than they had. I am grateful to the scientists, the technologist, the technicians because this is so. Without their efforts I might now be looking ahead with dread to a winter in a sod shanty. Or I might not be alive at all.

Although C. P. Snow has written powerfully about the "two worlds" of the technologists and the humanists, I do not believe that we really have two worlds. We have one world, in which technologists and humanists have different jobs to do. The future depends upon how well each group does its job.

Actually, of course, most of us are both technologists and humanists. The housewife is both simultaneously when she cooks a meal while listening to the record player or even reading a book or planning for the next PTA meeting. A humanist is a technologist when he is changing a tire or repairing an electrical appliance, and the technologist who works all day in a laboratory or a factory becomes something of a humanist when he watches the six o'clock news, reads a magazine, or goes to a movie. Snow's two worlds are thus not completely separable things.

Some of our hope for the future must lie in the technologists who are also very strong humanists. I think of Robert Milliken and Robert Oppenheimer as examples — two scientists who pushed against the frontiers of knowledge in their specialities but who also read widely, thought deeply, wrote well, and enjoyed and were knowledgeable about music, ballet, and the theater. Or I think of Miroslav Holub, the distinguished pathologist from Czechoslovakia who wrote stimulating poetry like this one called "A Boy's Head."

> In it there is a space-ship
> and a project
> for doing away with piano lessons.
>
> And there is
> Noah's ark
> which shall be first.

And there is
an entirely new bird,
an entirely new hare,
an entirely new bumblebee.

There is a river
that flows upwards.

There is a multiplication table.

There is anti-matter.

And it just cannot be trimmed.

I believe
that only what cannot be trimmed
is a head.

There is much promise
in the circumstance
that so many people have heads.

(translated from the Czech by
Jan Milner)

"There is much promise in the circumstance that so many people have heads." Those of us who are primarily humanists have heads, too. We often don't think very much about multiplication tables, or rivers that run upward, or spaceships, and we swear at computers and bewail what science seems to be doing to us. But we have heads, some of which cannot be trimmed, but some of which we trim too much. We are humanists, but we often value too much or seem to value too much the trimmings from other people's heads, the superficial, the unimportant. Too seldom do we use the humanities to enhance human understanding. Too seldom do we consider basic questions, such as Who am I? What is man? What is man's potential? Where can he go if he survives? What can we do to increase the possibility of survival? What in man is worth preserving and building upon? How can we preserve it and build upon it?

The tool that symbolizes the scientist may be the microscope, used to study intensively the minutiae of the world. One tool that could symbolize the humanist is the telescope, probing afar, looking beyond the immediate surroundings, opening new universes of thought and action and possibility. We humanists often stifle the imaginations that we should be nourishing, we are often

petty when we should be giants, we fail to think of ourselves as Shelley's "legislators of mankind" and content ourselves with rhyme schemes and comma splices.

We are, or should be, the makers of dreams. Big dreams and little dreams. Impractical dreams but also practical dreams. Dreams built upon understanding of human beings, their strengths and their limitations. Dreams of better family life. Dreams of cooperation in the community. Dreams of a less corrupt state and nation. Dreams of brotherhood.

What do we teachers of the humanities, of English especially, have to do with dreams, with the building of dreams? A great deal, I believe, if we ourselves have vision and have not forgotten how to dream.

We teach children language. Language is much more than "correctness." It is much more than sentence structure. Language is a tool that reflects its users. It can be a symbol both of their inmost thoughts and of the false face that we all wear most of the time in conversing with others. You remember the O'Neill play in which each character speaks his own inward, unvoiced thoughts and then dons a mask and says something very different to whoever is with him. We all do that constantly, with good or bad reasons. We often speak semifalsehoods to make or keep friends or to avoid giving pain, but also sometimes to deceive, to mislead, to make others think we are better than or at least different from what we really are. How often in school, though, do we talk about such uses of language?

How often do we discuss with our students the power of language? Language symbolizes the power of men and women to conceive great ideas and to develop them for use. The Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution are two examples; the Gettysburg Address is another. I believe that *Huckleberry Finn* is a great social document, and so is Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*. Any piece of literature that can move man to action represents the power of language. But if we are petty in our teaching of language, our students will be petty in their use of it, and they will fail to grasp its power. They will continue to believe that "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Words can hurt — hurt more deeply and more lastingly than mere physical bruises. How long and how painfully have you carried with you the memory of an unkind word, a cutting and unjust criticism, a false accusation?

So in our teaching of language let's concentrate on power, not just on grammar and usage. Teach those, of course, as needed.

Teach the English sentence, though, as a patterned symbol of what men may say and do to each other. Teach it as a beautiful representation of man's ability to systematize — for the English sentence, properly understood, is a marvelously systematic machine. Teach the sentence to show something about that wonderful mechanism, the human brain, which works with supercomputer speed to extract from our thousands of words the ones that fit the specific occasion and to put them together in an orderly pattern; teach the student — even the slow student — to respect himself because his brain is capable of performing this intricate operation.

Go beyond grammar and usage to show the relationship of language to history. If the Angles and Saxons hadn't been invited to the British Isles in the fifth century, we might all be speaking a Celtic tongue. If it hadn't been for the Norman Conquest, our language would be very different. If there had been no Renaissance, it would have differed in other ways. If the French or Spanish rather than the English had won the far-fronted wars in the New World, today's major language in America might not have been English at all, and our entire history and mode of life would have been different.

Show the relationship of language and technology. Every major new invention enriches the language. Think of the hundreds of terms brought into English because of the automobile, television, hi-fi sets, space exploration. If my grandparents were to come back to life today, they would hear countless words, meaningless to them, that are parts of our everyday lives.

Teach language as a commentary upon human life. We coin new words because new words are needed for the things and the ideas we develop as we move toward our hidden destiny. And once a word has been coined, much can happen to it. It can expand its meaning, radiating out from a central meaning to many extensions of that meaning. *Power,* for instance, has the central meaning of "be able," but it has radiated to such other meanings as are suggested by "man of power," "a world power," "the power of language," "electrical power," or "the nth power" in mathematics. A word may rise in popular esteem; the Anglo-Saxon "sty-ward," or keeper of the pigsty, rose so that in the form *Stuart* it became the name of a family of British rulers. Or a word may go down in esteem; perhaps because some married women are less virtuous than they might be, the Anglo-Saxon *huswyf,* which meant "housewife," has become our word *hussy.*

Let's try to build an interest in words, then, I am saying —

a love of words, a desire to play with words and work with words, a respect for words as the powerful tools they are. If language study is to be as relevant as it can be, it must transcend workbook exercises on *who* and *whom*.

Our work in composition should also transcend the trivial. In the best of the British schools that I have visited, and also in the best of American schools, oral and written compositions grow from an eagerness to express ideas, to share those ideas with one's fellow students and not just with the teacher, sometimes to provide information that others may use and value, sometimes to convince or persuade, sometimes to share a moment of beauty or a moment of excitement or humor. Occasionally, though, or even frequently, the compositions arise from self-searching, from self-analysis, from the desire to ponder a question and to order one's thoughts concerning it. Composition represents an opportunity, in fact, to place in order one's thoughts concerning some part of the universe and one's own position in that universe, to commune with oneself about such questions as I suggested earlier: Who am I? What are my strengths and my weaknesses? Where can I go? What can I do? As of this moment, exactly what do I believe about this or that question, and why? Why do others' beliefs differ from mine? What can I, one three-billionth part of humanity, do for humanity?

Composition affords the opportunity to express reality and to express hopes and dreams. It can clarify for a young person the qualities he or she may look for in a school, in a career, in a choice of mate, in a family, in a home, in a community. If enough young people can be encouraged to dream about the world they would like to live in, that world has a better chance of coming into existence. I'm not disturbed by the current restlessness of youth, by their sometimes open rebellion against the world we have brought them into. There are endless things that should be protested about, that should be rebelled against. A quiet, unconcerned acceptance of evil can only perpetuate and increase evil. I want young people to protest against evil, against man's inhumanity to man, against the trivia that govern so many of our lives, against the misuse of power, against what is wrong in their education, against the pollution (physical and spiritual) of our environment. I want them to think about what they can do about these evils, and how they can do it. If many current protests by youth are unconstructive and devoted to trivia or are even destructive, the reason in part is that we have not done enough to show young people how they can be constructive in their thinking and how

they can differentiate the trivial from the significant. Composition is a tool for accomplishing that, if we as teachers don't insist that our students always write conventional ideas in conventional ways about conventional subjects.

Now I turn to literature. I think of the wife of a professor-friend of mine, an intelligent, well-educated woman in her thirties who majored in English in college. For five years after she completed her English major she read almost nothing except the daily newspaper. Intelligent though she was, literature study as interpreted by her college turned her off, not on. Only after five years had she recovered sufficiently from her education that she again began reading novels, poetry, plays, and so on.

This lady's experience is not unique. Millions of children in elementary and especially in junior and senior high schools develop an antipathy toward literature. Countless college graduates seldom open a book for pleasure. The reading of unnumbered adults is confined largely to technical manuals needed in their occupations.

What have we done wrong in our teaching of literature? Why does literature so often turn readers off rather than on?

I suspect that the fault lies largely in what we do with literature in the English class. I've been guilty myself of dissecting a poem and leaving the bloody pieces on the floor of my classroom laboratory. I've taught literary history as a substitute for literature, assuming falsely that if my students could relate names and dates they knew something about literature. And my "new critic" friends with their learned jargon about "paradox" and "objective correlative" and the like have turned off still other students. So have the others who think that a student has mastered a poem because he can describe its meter and rhyme scheme, or tell who is speaking and what the situation is. As a high school sophomore I almost deserted literature because I had a teacher who spent a year having us pick out similes and metaphors and other figures of speech and forcing us to memorize long passages that often said nothing to us.

Literature can be relevant to human lives if we let it be so. But the instructional focus must permit the relevance to show through. Years ago I wrote a little essay called "Poetry Is People." I'd expand that now to say "Literature Is People." In literature we find descriptions of people and the actions of people. In life most of us know only a few hundred people, and we may know only one or two dozen really well. But through literature we can expand our acquaintanceship indefinitely, and we can get inside the

skins of dozens of people, learning their deepest motivations, their dreams and their fears, their joys and their heartaches, their potential realized and unrealized.

So I think now that our emphasis in teaching literature should be on the people in it. I'll never dissect another literary work, although I may casually help students to see how the structure and the language the author employs help him to show what he wants to show. Mainly, though, I believe we should be concerned with why a character is as he is, how and why he interacts with others as he does, why he was less great than he might have been, how and why he changed in the course of a novel or play. We can put him into different circumstances and find out how he would react there. I believe that understandings of those kinds have always been important but that as population grows they become even more important. Three billion people inhabit this small globe, and in a decade or two, if humanity survives, the total will be four billion. There's no place for hermits any more. We are becoming increasingly urbanized. We rub shoulders in elevators with people we've never seen before and will never see again. We attend ball games and other spectacles with fifty thousand persons jammed into a square block or so of land. We deal constantly with people, in person and by mail. We insult one another, make one another angry, fight in the streets, commit arson, steal property, sometimes kill one another, and sometimes we do nothing when a woman is raped before our eyes — because we don't want to get "involved." But we are involved, ceaselessly. The bell does toll for thee, and for me, for everybody.

Our human interaction has its bright side, too. Acts of kindness still exist. Love still exists in many families. Many people still want unselfishly to serve others. Good deeds are seldom publicized, though my local paper frequently has a story about farmers who plow the fields or harvest the crops of one of their neighbors who is ill, and when New York had its blackout the papers ran many little stories about the ways that people helped one another.

Literature, I am saying, if we don't kill it in our classrooms, shows our students a multitude of truths about people. Each of us combines Caliban and Ariel. We are simultaneously gross, flesh-ridden, self-seeking, and idealistic and spiritually beautiful, though the proportions may vary in each of us. The more we know about people, the better we may be able to get along with them on our crowded planet, where we must *learn to get along with others if we are to survive at all.*

The student who knows much about the yearnings of human

beings as expressed in literature will share many of those yearnings, can meditate upon them, and can do his one three-billionth part to turn worthy yearnings into realities. Literature can help him to dream the dreams the world needs, dreams of himself and of his contributions to that world. It can show him the obstacles he will face and challenge him to find, with his fellows, the ways to destroy, surmount, or circumvent those obstacles. "This is the search of mankind," literature says to the student. And if he is moved, he asks, "What can be my role in the search?"